

# THE INTERNATIONAL ZOO YEARBOOK

## VOLUME VI

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# ZOOS

## THE CONCEPT OF ZOOS IN AFRICA

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FROM time to time one hears criticisms of the principle of maintaining zoos in Africa and although at present there are only comparatively few African zoos, it seems certain that their number will increase and it would therefore perhaps be profitable to examine the purpose and function of African zoos.

The remarks that follow refer basically to West Africa, and in particular, Nigeria.

Despite the current conservation effort with its attendant publicity and oft-repeated words and phrases, such as 'extinction' and 'gone forever', it is still a common misconception among Europeans and Americans that the whole surface of the African continent is teeming with wild life and that every African therefore sees wild animals every day. In Nigeria, at least, this simply is not true. As the country develops, cities expand, houses and towns become more comfortable and necessary places to live in, people leave the land and thus their contact with nature is diminished. At the same time, Nigeria has a large population and an increasing amount of land is being devoted to agriculture. The area in southern Nigeria referred to as the forest zone has been greatly changed by man's activities and now contains little high forest. The predominant vegetation today is plantations and groves of oil palms, cola, cocoa, orange trees, yams, maize, cassava and other food crops, while the roadsides are lined with a tangled, homogenous mass of creeping and climbing plants. Farm plots are numerous, except, of course, in the forest reserves, and it must be remembered that many of the farmers working these plots carry a gun with them whenever they go into the bush. Even animals that will provide only a small amount of meat (civets, genets, pangolins, pouched rats) are killed and eaten.

I have written elsewhere (Golding, 1964) that the attitude of most Nigerians to nature is one of distrust. Plants other than food plants are hacked down continually to allow the crops to grow and if an animal is not killed for its meat, it is killed as a source of actual or potential danger. Thus, although there may be other aspects to consider, looked at from a day-to-day, practical viewpoint, this lack of sympathy with nature is not without reason.

Many West African countries are developing an interest in preserving the remaining game and in many areas there is plenty of animal life left relatively undisturbed. In Northern Dahomey there is a delightful but remote reserve where there are fairly large numbers of antelopes, warthogs, hippos and

a few lions. In West Cameroon, strenuous efforts are being made to control hunting generally and there is great interest among the forestry people in the gorillas which still exist there. West Cameroon has also, incidentally, started a small zoo on the coast and a larger one is planned in Bamenda.

If these countries are to be really successful in developing an indigenous as well as a foreign interest in their wildlife, it seems to me that the general attitude of disinterest among ordinary people will have to change; and if this attitude is to change, I feel that it will only do so through the exertion of a gentler, more enlightened personal and practical example from people who feel that this whole concept is important and who are not easily deterred by seemingly great odds.

Many visitors to Ibadan Zoo have never seen an elephant or a chimpanzee before and the idea of any kind of psychological contact between such creatures and a human being is a totally new idea. For example, outside the cage housing our young gorillas there is often a group of onlookers. Many of them show a great interest in the animals but at the same time, as a group, they frequently give an impression of slight suspicion or fear. If the animals are brought out of the cage without warning and into the public area, all bystanders frequently run away in great panic, even though the gorillas are small. However, if I walk quietly into the cage and begin to play with the animals, talking to them, chasing them, allowing them to chase me, making them 'grin' with delight, the mood of the crowd changes. Many of them are quite obviously incredulous that a 'wild, dangerous animal' can display emotions even remotely comparable to human ones. They become more relaxed and greatly enjoy the whole performance and should I bring the animals out after this, the crowd gathers round and watches the animals closely. This kind of personal example can be used, of course, for many other species, and the same basic reaction even holds good for snakes which are greatly and universally feared here. I have had school parties in which the children were practically fighting each other in their attempts to touch or hold a tame python. If the same snake had been



seen in the bush, these children would have either run away as fast as they could or beaten the animal to death with an adequately long stick.

Running a zoo in West Africa, which consists in the main of countries which as yet are undeveloped, involves other advantages and disadvantages perhaps not met with in some other parts of the world. A country such as Nigeria, although one of the more economically stable African countries, does not have large financial resources to devote to such things as zoos. Thus it follows that the cages and enclosures at Ibadan Zoo have been built as cheaply as possible and this has resulted in the past in the erection of inferior structures, difficult to keep clean, laborious to operate and infested with rats that are almost impossible to eliminate because of the many crevices in the buildings. However, cheap structures need not necessarily be poorly designed or difficult to maintain and one advantage we have over many other parts of the world is that we do not have to provide thermal insulation or heating units, as long as we provide adequate protection from wind and rain. Moreover, a zoo in Africa does not need to be large and if only a small amount of money is available, its purpose and aims can still be furthered by having a small number of animals in a few cheap but well designed and functional enclosures.

A zoo starting as a new project in an African country may well run into difficulties in trying to procure keeper staff experienced in animal care or even with a background of real compassion for animals. At Ibadan Zoo we now have a group of Nigerian keepers who really do take an interest in their work and who, in one or two cases, have changed their jobs and taken a reduction in their wages (already very low) to come and work in the zoo. It is hoped to send one or two of them to Frankfurt Zoo in the near future and the stimulus of working in one of the world's major zoos for a short period will undoubtedly be a great advantage to them when they return to Africa. With regard to this aspect of training keepers, even if the funds are not available to send them to Europe, I should like to emphasise once again the importance of personal example. To try and run a zoo

here without at least one experienced and sympathetic person to act as a practical guide, would almost certainly result in chaos.

Apart from finding staff, it seems more difficult to attract an African of really good general education to take up work in a zoo because at the moment people of such status desire clean, white-collar jobs. However, if the zoo is to maintain contact with the public and other zoos throughout the world, it is essential to have a man not only with experience and practical ability but also able to write reports and articles, to keep records, correspond with other zoos and to give illustrated talks to schools and other organisations.

One great advantage of a zoo in tropical Africa is the availability of large quantities of cheap fruits, vegetables, seeds and browse. Particularly during the rainy season when everything grows so quickly, our elephants are fed by sending a man into the nearby bush to cut large bundles of leaves and succulent grasses. This is obviously a much more natural food than is given to these animals in Europe where their staple food is usually dry grass, an item which our animals here will only eat with reluctance. We can offer our monkeys a very wide selection of fruits, nuts and leaves daily, and our gorillas are regularly given whole banana stems and other green material gathered fresh locally. Our camel costs next to nothing to feed – it is simply taken and tied up in the bush where it browses happily for hours.

A further factor which should be advantageous to a new zoo in West Africa but which has been wrongly used in some places is that local small mammals, birds and reptiles can generally be obtained cheaply and easily. However, it should be remembered that the animals must be trapped, transported and handled with very great care, though unfortunately this is not always the case.

If a zoo is to be started in a new area or country, the mistake of accumulating a haphazard collection of animals and putting them in the charge of inexperienced people just because the animals and labour are cheap must be avoided at all costs. There is no doubt in my mind that if an interest in West African wildlife is to develop along even

remotely similar lines to the interest already existing in East Africa and other parts of the world, small zoos must play an important part. By presenting a living zoological collection to the public in safe surroundings, as opposed to the 'dangers' of the bush, people can be stimulated to watch animals without

a stick in the hand or a gun on the shoulder and perhaps in this way we can make a contribution to an assured future for West African game reserves.

REFERENCE

GOLDING, R. R. (1964): *Animals*, 5 (8).